

SOME BIRDS OF A COORG DOWN

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(*With 3 plates*).

For ornithological purposes South India may be divided into two definite areas, a Wet and a Dry Zone. The former includes the range of the Western Ghats and a strip of varying width on either side, while the latter comprises all the dry Central plateau, the Eastern plains and part of the Western littoral. Each has its typical avifauna, quite distinct but showing a remarkable parallelism and giving an excellent demonstration of the effect of climate on the differentiation of species.

The boundary line, here at any rate sharply defined, runs right through Coorg, making this little province of peculiar interest to the ornithologist.

The full force of the S.W. Monsoon strikes the Ghats, which rise sheer from the Malabar plain to a height of 5,000-6,000 feet. It sheds much of its moisture on their western slopes but has the strength to carry an ample supply of rain to the rolling plateau which stretches for thirty or forty miles on the other side. It is however finally defeated by the parallel range of low, jungle-clad hills bounding the district on the East. Beyond these the Dry Zone begins.

While on the whole the Dry Zone birds are Low-country and the Wet Zone species Hill forms, rainfall seems to have a much greater effect on distribution than altitude. From the foot of the Ghats almost at sea-level, over the hills, and throughout Coorg proper lying at an average elevation of 3,500 feet, the same species are to be seen, but a mere ten miles through the eastern forest belt and a very slight drop in height brings one into quite a different country.

In the North of the province this strip of jungle is at its narrowest and the chain of hills becomes broken. Here and there patches of country of the Dry Zone type encroach through the barrier and in such spots one finds a very interesting intermingling of the two types of avifauna.

The stretch of downland which forms the subject of this study is one of these. It consists of some three or four hundred acres of grassland and scrub, forming not so much a hilltop as the culmination of a gradual rise of land here reaching 3,750 feet. On the East and South it is bounded by the forest, a growth of mixed deciduous trees and giant bamboo, while on the West and North are paddy fields, village gardens, and coffee plantations under thick evergreen shade. The greater portion is open turf kept short by constant grazing save for frequent tussocks of rushes too tough even for the hungry cattle which roam there. A few solitary wild fig-trees and Indian Laburnums (*Cassia fistula*) grow

scattered here and there. All this part is used as a golf course and the high road runs across it, so that, apart from the herd-boys who are always wandering about, it is much frequented. Round the borders and at one end extending over a considerable area there is more cover, clumps of big trees and brakes of lantana, sandal and other scrub growth.

Leaving out of the reckoning most of the birds of prey, swifts and other species, whose daily range is too great to be restricted to such a small tract, an analysis of the representative bird population gives some eighty-five species which occur or have appeared with fair regularity during the last four years. Of these the majority are typical birds of the Coorg countryside and the Wet Zone in general and I do not propose to deal with them here in detail, but sixteen may be classed as Dry Zone forms, eight of them being regular and numerous visitors to the whole of Coorg during the winter, while the remainder, though common enough further east, are seldom seen over the boundary except in a few places such as this.

A comparison of the two divisions shows that the Dry Zone types are dominant. I have remarked on the constant parallelism that occurs and, in almost every case, it will be found that the Dry Zone species or sub-species is that typical throughout the greater part of India, while its opposite number is restricted to the S.W. of the Peninsula. Again, whereas it is rare to find any purely Wet Zone species outside its ecological bounds, one of the conspicuous features of the bird life of the borderland is the annual Westerly invasion of Dry Zone birds in the cold weather and their retreat before the arrival of the rains.

While the long-distance winter migrants from the North all arrive and depart within a few weeks of each other, there is no such uniformity in this local movement, and it is evident that a number of different factors affect the wanderings of the various species. Some leave early to breed in the Dry Zone, others stay up to breed and depart when the young are fledged, and one or two only come up for the breeding season and are gone again within a couple of months.

Although very attractive to these visitors, the extent of the down is too small and the monsoon conditions too severe to encourage permanent colonisation. So far as I have been able to ascertain there is only one strictly Dry Zone species, the White-browed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus luteolus*), that has established itself as a permanent resident remaining throughout the year. It is a great place for bulbuls, for within a square mile can be found six of the seven species inhabiting Coorg. As usual the Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Otocompsa jocosca fuscicaudata*) is much the commonest and abounds in the scrub jungle and cultivation and penetrates a short distance into the forest. It is followed, in numbers, by the Red-vented Bulbul (*Molpastes cafer cafer*). It is interesting to note that although the former is decidedly the dominant species over much of the moister parts of South India, it has not nearly such a wide range as *M. cafer* and is unaccountably absent from Ceylon, though it has reached the Andamans and Nicobars. In this



Yellow-browed Bulbul [*Iole icterica* (Strickl.)] on nest.



Hoopoe at nest.

district at any rate the two species are found side by side all over the country in more or less constant proportions though *O. jocosus* is perhaps less numerous in the Dry Zone, and further East, in Mysore, leaves *M. cafer* in sole possession of the field. The latter bird however is nowhere to be found in such numbers as the Red-whiskered Bulbul in its favourite haunts.

The Yellow-browed Bulbul (*Iole icterica*) is a forest species but frequently wanders into the clumps of trees growing among the scrub especially where these have an undergrowth of evergreen-shrubs. It is also to be seen in the coffee plantations and a coffee bush is a favourite nesting site.

The remaining three are much more restricted in their habitat. The Grey-headed Bulbul (*Microtarsus poiocephalus*), is a lover of moist, dark forest preferably near water and is only found in this rather dry country in the belts of evergreens growing in the damp ravines of the few permanent brooks. The Ruby-throated Bulbul (*Pycnonotus gularis*) likewise demands forest, but of a rather lighter order and haunts the borders of these belts where they mingle with the prevailing bamboo. The White-browed Bulbul, on the other hand, is entirely confined to the scrubland with its dense lantana brakes where it loves to lurk, for it is a secretive bird and, until one learns to recognise its loud rattling call, one does not realise how common it is. At least twenty pairs must be resident in the neighbourhood and their numbers seem to be increasing but there is no other colony within miles. They are cut off from their natural biotope by the forest and, though the more open cultivation in the other direction seems not unsuited to their requirements, they do not occur there. This may perhaps be explained by the fact that in this part of the world every mile further West means an increase of several inches in the annual rainfall. They do not appear to move about much. Each pair has its own patch of thicket which they seldom leave, facing out the heaviest bursts of the monsoon, though at such times they are depressed and silent. They undoubtedly breed here but I have not so far been able to find a nest, their retiring habits and the impenetrable nature of their haunts making the search a difficult one.

Another resident which, though not so particular as the White-browed Bulbul and which is really a Dry Zone species, is the Southern Grey-backed Shrike (*Lanius schach caniceps*). Three true shrikes are on the list of Coorg birds, but of these the Bay-backed Shrike (*Lanius vittatus*) is definitely a Plains bird and only just crosses the eastern border. The Grey-backed Shrike, while much more numerous in the Dry Zone, is locally distributed in small numbers all over Coorg where suitable country obtains, being particularly fond of the borders of paddy fields. Wherever found they are strictly sedentary. Ever since I have known the down, two pairs have occupied the same range of a few acres each. For a month or two after they are fledged the young birds of the year hang about but they are all driven off before the cold weather. Though they have harsh voices when annoyed, the male sings very sweetly in the breeding season. The song is low and by no means powerful,

uttered in a meditative fashion as if half under the breath and not at all what one would expect from such a bold, aggressive bird. The singer is a remarkable mimic introducing all sorts of other bird and animal noises in a most realistic manner.

By contrast the third species, the Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus cristatus*) is a great wanderer breeding in Siberia and visiting us during the cold weather. It is one of the earliest of the long-distance migrants to arrive and quite the last to depart. Most of these visitors are young birds. They are common on the down between October and April and, unlike their resident relatives, are by no means confined to open country but are to be seen just as frequently inside the coffee estates and the edges of the forest. They may sing in their breeding quarters but while with us they chiefly make their presence known by their loud, ill-tempered scoldings.

The allied families of the Wood Shrikes, Cuckoo Shrikes, Minivets and Drongos are all represented among the birds of the down but the residents are Wet Zone types. The Malabar Wood Shrike (*Tephrodornis gularis sylvicola*), is common in the coffee plantations and among the big trees round the borders, whereas the Common Wood Shrike (*T. pondicerianus pondicerianus*) which entirely replaces it in the Dry Zone does not occur. The same applies to the Orange Minivet (*Pericrocotus flammeus*) and the Rosy Minivet (*P. roseus roseus*), while the Little Minivet (*P. peregrinus peregrinus*) is equally at home in either biotope, provided it is fairly well-wooded. The little black and white Pied Shrike (*Hemipus picatus picatus*), more a Minivet than a Shrike in habits, is also not uncommon but does not appear to extend further East.

The Black-headed Cuckoo Shrike (*Lalage sykesii*) is a migrant, arriving in October and departing before the breeding season. They are regular frequenters of the down during the cold weather but I have never seen one there after the middle of April though I have found the nest only ten miles away just beyond the forest belt. The Wet Zone representative of this subfamily, the Large Grey Cuckoo Shrike (*Graucalus javensis macei*) is hardly a resident of the down as it is a great wanderer but it turns up at all times of the year even in the middle of the monsoon. It is perhaps hardly fair to class it as a Wet Zone bird as it occurs in the Dry Zone also. It is really a forest species whose range extends for some way on either side.

The Drongos form a most interesting group. Their characteristic habits make them the most conspicuous of birds and though generally so similar in their ways, the difference in the distribution of the various species is most marked. The two resident forms of the Wet Zone are the Bronzed Drongo (*Chaptia aenea malayensis*), and the magnificent Racket-tailed Drongo (*Dissemurus paradiseus malabaricus*). These are both woodland birds and are common in the coffee bounding the down and frequently wander into the big trees in the scrub. The corresponding resident in the Coorg Dry Zone is the White-bellied Drongo (*Dicrurus coerulescens coerulescens*), which has occurred on the down on one or two occasions

in the hot weather as a straggler. It is definitely a bird of rather dry country and low elevations and it is strange that its Ceylon sub-species (*D. coerulescens leucopygialis*) is resident and numerous in the upcountry tea districts at 5,000-6,000 feet where there is an annual rainfall of anything up to 200 inches. The Black Drongo (*D. macrocerus peninsularis*) and the Grey Drongo (*D. longicaudatus*) are probably, with the exception of the Indian Bee-eater, the commonest of our local winter migrants and from October to March are to be seen everywhere. The down with its open spaces and grazing cattle particularly suits their requirements and the telegraph wires running along the main road are a favourite perch. One of the most familiar spectacles of cold weather evenings are King Crows hawking flies from the tree-tops long after all the other diurnal birds have gone to roost. Each has its special perch on the highest point it can find to which it returns again and again after each sally.

* There have been sundry notes in the *Journal* on the breeding association of King Crows and Orioles. While the two species do not seem to have much in common in the off season, it is noteworthy that the Indian Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus kundoo*) arrives in Coorg at just about the same time as the Black Drongo. Both species have much the same range in the winter months, leave at the same time and are absent even from the neighbouring portions of the Dry Zone during the monsoon. From the results of the Eastern Ghats survey it seems almost certain that the Orioles migrate to Northern India to breed, but where our King Crows go remains to be discovered. The Drongos appear to be rather given to allying themselves with other birds. In the case of the Racket-tailed Drongo one notices a constant association with the Tree-Pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*). This does not however extend to the breeding season, the Drongo wisely disapproving of having that arrant egg-thief as a near neighbour; but at all other times of the year the two are to be found in company and if one is seen the other is sure to be close at hand. What the tie may be is difficult to see unless it is a common hatred of hawks, owls and all birds of prey, for whom they are always on the lookout, and band together to mob and drive away.

Even more numerous in the cold weather than the King Crow is the little Indian Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis orientalis*). They swarm everywhere except in the forest and are particularly numerous on the down. With their bright plumage, pleasant voices, and wonderful mastery of the air, there are few more charming birds. It is a never-failing joy to watch them hunting, darting out from a prominent bough after a passing bee or butterfly, swooping and looping with the utmost grace and agility, almost invariably returning triumphant to their perch to hammer the victim into subjection. They are sociable and affectionate little creatures and vast numbers will roost in company in a favourite clump of trees. As the sun sets the flocks come in from all directions and the last minutes of daylight are spent dust bathing on a sandy road or with much excited twittering performing aerial manoeuvres in massed formation above the tree-tops. They are

intolerant of cold and on a chilly December morning one may often see a row of green fluffy little balls huddling as tight as they can pack along a bough, loath to stir until the sun has well warmed the world. While the great majority leave at the end of March, one or two pairs stay to breed in Coorg. They have never done so on the down, but I know of at least two spots where solitary pairs have nested for some years in succession. These are apparently just cases of individual idiosyncrasy but may possibly be the forerunners of a more general colonisation as there seems no reason why they should not breed here in large numbers. Even the few that do stay to raise a family leave before the monsoon, and apparently the old birds migrate to some distance as practically all those that one sees in the neighbouring Dry Zone in June and July are juveniles lacking the lengthened, wire-like central tail feathers.

One other species of bee-eater, the Chestnut-headed (*Merops leschenaulti leschenaulti*), is to be seen on the down fairly frequently but their movements are irregular and puzzling. They breed in small colonies along the banks of the larger rivers all through Coorg and for the rest of the year seem to wander casually in small flocks, lingering in one spot for a few days and then passing on. They may turn up at any time even during the height of a monsoon burst and the weather seems to have little effect on them.

Most of the birds hitherto mentioned occur all over Coorg during the cold weather, but the remainder of the Dry Zone visitors to the down will seldom be seen elsewhere outside their native territory.

Certain birds have become almost parasitic on Mankind, and as the wilderness is opened up and developed extend into regions where they have hitherto been unable to penetrate. The House Crow is a typical example, although it is perhaps out of place to bring it into this paper as it does not occur within the limits under consideration. It is by nature a bird of the plains but has gained a precarious footing in Coorg, a few pairs inhabiting three of the only four towns of any size of which the province can boast. Even here, they are far outnumbered by the Jungle Crows and appear to exist very much upon sufferance never venturing beyond the built-up areas. The status of the Common Mynah (*Acridotheres tristis tristis*) is rather similar, but it has so far only reached the confines of the Wet Zone and I have not come across it anywhere except on the down. Unlike the Crows however, they seem in perfect amity with their near relatives the Jungle Mynahs (*Aethiopsar fuscus mahrattensis*), which are the prevailing species. Nearly always during the winter one can pick out one or two common mynahs among the small parties of jungle mynahs that attend the grazing cattle or spend their evenings chattering on one of the lone trees scattered about the down, and both join with the little Grey-headed Mynahs in the big, cold weather roosting assemblies. Although our birds linger on into the hot weather and pair off when the Jungle Mynahs start breeding, I do not think they nest with us and they are certainly absent in

the monsoon. The Common Mynah is slightly larger and heavier than its cousin and would presumably be the winner if it came to blows, so that one can only presume that their scarcity is a question of climate. It is really rather strange that they should be found at all as they are very much birds of open cultivation and the few that do occur must have followed the carts up the Ghat road running through the wide stretch of uninhabited country cutting them off from their normal habitat. Even in the Dry Zone they leave the jungles to the Jungle Mynah and the Brahminy Mynah (*Temenuchus pagodarum*). One would rather have expected to see the latter bird which swarms just over the border and is very partial to the type of light jungle found on the down but to my knowledge they never penetrate through the forest belt.

Another bird which finds its furthest limit on the down is the Coppersmith (*Xantholaema haemacephala indica*). The Malabar Coppersmith (*X. rubricapilla malabarica*) with its relation the Small Green Barbet (*Thereiceryx viridis*) must be the commonest birds over a great portion of Coorg, their only possible rival being the Red-whiskered Bulbul. They are especially numerous in the coffee estates where wild fig trees grown as shade afford limitless food supplies and nesting sites, and their monotonous calls are the most characteristic bird sounds of the countryside. They abound in the plantations and the trees round the edge of the down but do not extend far into the forest on the East. Here they encounter the true Coppersmith which can be recognised at a distance by the duller green of its plumage and close at hand by the yellow which replaces much of the crimson markings on face and throat. This is the species found in the Dry Zone. It occurs in small numbers through the forest wherever there is a fair stand of trees among the bamboos, while except during the monsoon one or two are usually to be seen on the down. The two species do not intermix and the visitors have a furtive and subdued air as though they realised that they were in unfriendly country. They carefully avoid the strongholds of their rivals and confine themselves to the scattered trees out in the middle of the grassland or to those on its immediate edge. They are usually solitary and I have never heard them calling and do not think that it is likely that they breed here. Probably like so many frugivorous birds they wander a great deal according to the supply of their favourite food.

This is certainly the case with the Southern Green Pigeon (*Crocopus phoenicopterus chlorogaster*) which, though common in the Dry Zone, is only a very rare visitor to the down in years when there is a particularly good crop of wild figs. The Pompadour Green Pigeon is much more numerous and almost any fig tree in fruit is sure to be attended by them, but except at these feeding places they are rarely seen and I have yet to discover their breeding haunts. All the Green Pigeons of course are adept at concealing themselves. There may be fifty in a tree but until one takes wing, their presence will often be quite unsuspected.

The two remaining, non-breeding Dry Zone visitors which have occurred on the down are the Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*

indica), and the Green-billed Malkoha (*Rhopodytes viridirostris*). Both appear to be mere strays. In some years none are seen but usually one or two turn up at any time between January and April and may linger about for several weeks or be gone in a day or two. There is no missing the presence of the rollers for they keep to the open and choose the most conspicuous perches, their favourites being the telegraph wires or the solitary Indian Laburnum trees which are leafless at that time of the year and, when they swoop down to catch the grasshoppers on which they largely feed, the beautiful blue of their wings is visible at a great distance. The Malkoha, on the other hand, is a skulker and is to be looked for among the scrub. It is decidedly shy and if aware that it is being watched disappears into the heart of the nearest thick tree. It clammers actively among the branches, rarely coming to the ground and is a poor flier seldom going any distance on the wing. At long range it looks not unlike a small male koel but the white tips to the graduated tail feathers are a good distinguishing mark. It is an extremely silent bird and I have never heard one utter a sound.

I have found four species which must definitely be classed as migrants breeding on or round the down. The Hoopoe is with us for the greater part of the year arriving in September and only leaving at the onset of the rains. Its favourite haunt is parkland where large trees grow plentifully but widely spaced on short sward. The latter is essential as they are entirely ground feeders, and dense undergrowth or even long grass is of no use to them. One or two pairs breed regularly in the neighbourhood, finding the down with its expanses of turf and big trees full of nesting holes much to their taste. They start early, usually at the beginning of February, well before the Mynahs are thinking of domestic affairs. Perhaps this is intentional as by the beginning of April, the latter have annexed every suitable hole and would think nothing of evicting their less sturdy neighbours. It always comes as a painful surprise that such a dainty and elegant bird as the Hoopoe should be so insanitary in its domestic arrangements. One has only to put one's nose near one of their nesting holes to identify the owner. Perhaps for this reason, in the case of the one or two pairs with which I have been intimately acquainted, the same site has never been occupied two years running, though they were undisturbed and the holes were vacant. They are devoted parents and, though I have been unable to discover whether the male takes his turn at incubation, he is indefatigable in feeding his mate while she is on the nest, and when the young hatch both are hard at work all day long. They seem to give themselves a lot of unnecessary labour. I watched one for the best part of an hour one morning in which time he made half a dozen trips to the same spot a good quarter of a mile away uphill. Grasshoppers and ants appeared to be his quarry and on examination of the ground they seemed to be no more numerous where he was searching than in an exactly similar locality within a hundred yards of the nest. I have several times had the luck to witness their courtship. The female in each case was the more ardent wooer.